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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 000991

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GILANI DECLARES WAR IN SWAT

REF: PESHAWAR 97

Classified By: CDA Gerald Feierstein for reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On May 7 in a landmark television and radio address to the nation, Prime Minister Gilani made an impassioned plea to Pakistanis to support decisive military action against the Taliban in Swat and surrounding areas. All political parties except Imran Khan's and the Jamaat-e-Islami supported the PM's call for military action; of note, Pakistan Muslim League-N leader Nawaz Sharif reportedly will offer in a televised interview tonight "unanimous" support to the GOP in this fight. Chief of Army Staff Kayani has pledged all available resources to crush the Taliban; aerial and artillery bombardment of Swat reportedly has begun. See septel for a more complete analysis of how we expect the Swat operation to unfold, but post believes that the Pakistan army quickly will become bogged down in Swat, where inevitably high civilian causalities will undermine nascent popular support for military action.

¶2. (C) In meetings organized by the UN today, there was agreement that the IDP population could swell to 1.3 million over at least the next six months; current WFP food stocks are sufficient to feed 600,000 for three months so we need urgently to press the UN to deploy an expanded, long-term humanitarian team to Pakistan (septel). Charge is writing to PM Gilani to urge that he announce soonest the appointment of a GOP coordinator for IDPs and that the GOP make its own urgent plea to the UN for humanitarian aid. See septel for an update on USG responses to the Pakistani's requests for military assistance. End summary.

GILANI CALLS FOR WAR AGAINST TALIBAN

¶3. (SBU) On May 7 in a televised address to the nation, Prime Minister Gilani announced the GOP was ordering the military to take decisive action against the Taliban in Swat.

In what was a landmark call to war, Gilani assured the nation that there would be no compromise on national sovereignty and no surrender to the Taliban. An impassioned Gilani said that his government had tried all possible options to resolve the issue peacefully and had even implemented shari'a law in the restive regions surrounding Swat. Gilani said that the GOP's efforts were perceived as a sign of weakness, and he detailed the Taliban's violations of the deal, stressing the barbarism and aggression against innocent civilians, female students, minorities, and citizens who cooperated with the security forces.

¶4. (SBU) Gilani noted that the call for decisive force was made only after careful contemplation and complete consensus from all political parties and democratic institutions. He called for all segments of Pakistani society to unite in their support of the Pakistani Armed Forces. He also called upon religious scholars and spiritual leaders to present the true image of Islam and the fact there is no room for oppression or coercion in Islam. Gilani mentioned that one billion RS (12.4 million USD) are being provided for the rehabilitation and welfare of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP), and he promised jobs to a member of each family that has lost one of its members at the hand of the militants.

KAYANI AND ZARDARI VOW TO TAKE DECISIVE ACTION

¶5. (SBU) On May 7, Chief of Army Staff Ashfaq Kayani chaired a corps commanders conference where he vowed to secure a decisive victory over the Taliban, echoing Gilani's call later that day to eliminate the terrorists once and for all. Kayani promised to mobilize all available resources to crush the Taliban. According to press reports, Kayani also said that the army was fully aware of the gravity of the internal threat. The COAS explained, "the army has developed full-scale facilities to focus on low intensity conflict related operations," adding that the military was fully prepared to meet conventional threats as well. Kayani also called for the cooperation of all elements of national power to fight terrorism and extremism. The Corps Commanders were also given a comprehensive briefing on the security situation in Swat and surrounding areas.

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¶6. (SBU) On May 7, President Zardari told reporters in Washington that the military operation against the Taliban would last until "normalcy" returned to the troubled areas. He spoke after Prime Minister Gilani's address to the nation and promised that the military would not stop until peace returned to Swat.

POLITICAL PARTIES SUPPORT MILITARY OPERATIONS

¶7. (SBU) The majority of political parties have voiced their wholehearted support for the GOP's decision to launch a full-scale military operation in Swat and Malakand Division. Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Imran Khan's right-wing Pakistani Tehreek Insaaf (PTI) were the only two parties to oppose military action. The JI said that while they oppose the Taliban, they want a political solution to the problem. JI leader Liaquat Baloch criticized the decision to take military action and said that the civilian government's inability to find a political solution and calling in the army was the government's failure. Imran Khan doomed the military operation to failure because the GOP had not enlisted the support of the Pakistani people. Besides these marginal voices, every political party came out in support of Gilani's speech. Many major Pakistani newspapers and television commentators congratulated the Prime Minister for finally taking a strong stance against the Taliban.

¶8. (C) Nawaz Sharif, chief of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), reportedly will say in a televised interview tonight that he is ready to support the government unconditionally because of the grave crisis facing Pakistan. Siddiqul Farooq, PML-N spokesperson, said that his party would extend all cooperation for the success of democracy and the security of Pakistan. Various Pakistan People's Party leaders have told Emboffs that no decisive action against the Taliban would be politically viable without PML-N support.

¶9. (C) The Awami National Party (ANP), which leads the Northwest Frontier Province government that signed the Swat accord, welcomed Gilani's remarks and military action. ANP's Senator Haji Adeel said the government took the decision

after fully exhausting all options for peaceful solutions. Senator Zahid Khan, ANP's information secretary, termed the PM's speech as strong and positive. He told Poloff it is the first of its kind by this government. Khan also said that the PM had listened to a delegation of parliamentarians from Swat and incorporated their advice into his speech. The SWAT delegation supported Gilani's call for military action, and had shared that Swat citizens were disillusioned with the untrustworthy TNSM leader Sufi Muhammad.

¶10. (SBU) Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) leader Altaf Hussain lauded the decision of sending Pakistani troops into Swat and blamed the militants for not adhering the agreement. The MQM has always opposed the deal with the Swat militants.

NWFP LOOKING FOR RESULTS

¶11. (C) Popular reaction to Gilani's speech in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) was positive but guarded. Virtually all contacts conditioned their support for a renewed military operations on the Pakistani government's seriousness of intent in truly pursuing the operation through to completion, and most also conditioned their support on the avoidance of collateral damage. The ANP Law Minister privately told the Consulate that "if the federal government is serious this time," the ANP would give their full support. ANP Provincial Assembly member Dr. Haider Ali, from Swat's militant-heavy Khawazakhela region, said that Swat locals were "fed up" and would support the government "if assured of minimal collateral damage." The Vice-Chancellor of Malakand University (in Swat) echoed this assessment of the feelings of Swatis, demanding a "real surgical operation" - not a "very superficial operation" as in 2007-8. Several contacts mentioned the plight of the IDPs; a PPP-Sherpao Provincial Assembly member characterized Gilani's promised one billion RS for IDPs as "far too low."

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CURRENT PAK MIL ACTIONS IN SWAT

¶12. (SBU) Military operations continued in Buner, with the focus on securing the main city of Daggar and the areas to the north, with a plan to seal the passes into Swat District. Although a small number of IDPs are returning to southern Buner, the operations in the northern half have resulted in further population displacement. The reinstatement of the tribal lashkars has been successful in holding some areas of the northern border of Buner near Swat. In Lower Dir, small operations continue, and the Air Force is targeting homes of militant commanders.

¶13. (SBU) In Swat, operations have started with mostly aerial bombing and the arrival of ground troops. In order to assist with these operations, forces are being sent from Buner, Bajaur, Mohmand, and Shangla, leaving few pockets of FC to maintain order in these areas. (Note: the military is the lead on the ground in Swat with some FC support. End note.) The Special Services Group is working with command and control elements on the ground, which is a new development in the methods the military uses to conduct operations.

¶14. (C) Within the next 72 hours, aerial and artillery assaults will continue in Swat to prepare areas for ground action. Eventually five military battalions will be sent to conduct ground operations in Swat (1 battalion = 500 soldiers).

¶15. (S) Comment: SOC-FWD Commander anticipates the Pakistani military will very likely become bogged down in Swat. This will put pressure on the ANP-led provincial government to seek yet another peace agreement with the militants to save

face.

¶16. (C) Comment continued: For now, many Pakistanis are welcoming the long-overdue expression of resolve by the GOP to fight the Taliban. If Nawaz Sharif truly backs the government unconditionally, this will provide some much-needed political cover for the PPP to support military operations. But the PM's hasty and unannounced 11 pm speech (with virtually no orchestrated follow-up this morning) demonstrates that they still have no strategic communications strategy to win and keep hearts and minds. As civilian casualties mount in what we expect will be a messy and protracted campaign in Swat, it will be increasingly difficult to sustain as yet nascent popular support for army action. Without a speedy and effective response to what is shaping up as a serious and sustained IDP crisis, images of suffering IDPs will undermine the GOP's counter-insurgency efforts. End comment.

FEIERSTEIN